



Striking a Balance

District acceptable-use policies must evolve to reflect the changing realities of 21st century learning.

By Kari Rhame Murphy

Wikipedia defines an acceptable-use policy (AUP) as a collection of rules established by the owner or manager of a network, website, or computer system to restrict the ways in which it's accessed and used. Sounds autocratic and binding, doesn't it?

But what if a school district's IT department *didn't* write its AUP? What if, instead, a variety of stakeholders collaborated to write a policy that reflects the district's values in terms of instruction and how technology is used?

Like most other districts in the United States, the Deer Park (Texas) Independent School District (DPIISD) wrote its first AUP in the mid-1990s when it began providing Internet accessibility to staff and students. Over the years, as technology changed and a few students and staff members misused district resources, we added some rules to the AUP and rewrote others. What began as a two-page document ultimately grew to exceed four pages.

Shifting the Focus from Acceptable to Responsible

As the "bring your own technology" movement has gained traction among educators, it's become increasingly clear that most districts' AUPs need to be revised. Ours was no different.

So about two years ago, DPIISD administrators began by modifying the student handbooks and student code of conduct to allow our 12,500 students to bring their personal computing devices to school on one condition: The devices could be used only for instructional purposes, pending approval by each school's principal.

Then, last fall, I challenged the district's technology department to make the necessary preparations so that students could access the DPIISD network using their own devices beginning in spring 2011. (We later delayed the launch of our BYOT program to fall 2011.)

As my team began the work of strengthening web access, developing cloud applications, and implementing stronger security measures, we set out to rewrite our AUP. The instructional technology staff and I began by pulling together our most innovative teachers who use Twitter, Skype and other Web 2.0 tools in the classroom. Together, we developed a set of guidelines pertaining to new technologies and how to use them with students, which we shared with teachers throughout the district as part of their professional development. It didn't seem efficient, however, to have an AUP and this other set of guidelines.

As DPIISD's chief technology officer, I decided to take a different approach. I wanted to create a single policy or set of guidelines that was positive in tone — one that would reflect what we value about learning, teach our students digital citizenship, and empower our teachers. With this in mind, I took the following steps, which may be helpful to other districts considering a move toward BYOT.



1. Create the vision.

Imagine learning in and out of a classroom environment where students are demonstrating 21st century skills. Then look at the technologies they're using to master their personal learning experience. Look again, and you'll see that the technologies change continuously.

My vision for technology use in DPISD supports the district's mission and vision. It focuses on the learning, and it's only when I look closely that I see the actual technologies that are needed to support that learning.

2. Form a committee.

In an effort to not "do things as we always do" and get the same results, I enlisted select members of the district's Educational Improvement Council to rewrite our AUP. This group included an assistant principal, teachers of various grade levels and subjects, parents, and a campus technology integration specialist. They understand the business of education in DPISD.

After articulating my technology vision to committee members, they wrote the following opening statement for what would become our new usage policy: *At Deer Park ISD, we use technology as one way of enhancing the mission to teach the skills, knowledge and behaviors students will need to succeed in the global community.*

3. Step aside.

Once you've assembled your committee, trust them to develop a policy that aligns with your vision.

As a general rule, technology administrators tend to control the rules for access, and I am no different. To prevent meddling (my own and that of my staff), I intentionally excluded technology department personnel from the committee. I also contracted with an outside facilitator who understood the business and values of DPISD, the importance of 21st century skills, and the ways in which classroom instruction is evolving. The facilitator served as our point person, making sure all aspects of instruction and technology misuse were covered.

With the keepers of the boxes and wires out of the way, the committee and facilitator could focus on how current and future technologies could enhance learning. Instead of an acceptable-use policy, they wrote two sets of Responsible Use Principles (RUP) — one for students and one for employees. Each one-and-a-half-page set of principles outlines the district's ...

- philosophy of technology supporting learning;
- desire for all members of the district community to be good digital citizens;
- conditions for using technology in a meaningful, safe and responsible way; conditions for using technology in accordance with state and federal laws.

(To read DPISD's Responsible Use Principles, go to dpiisd.org/tech_policies.)

When students and staff ask about the consequences they'll face for failing to adhere to these principles, we refer them to the student and employee handbooks and the student code of conduct.

In the RUP committee's view, every misuse of network resources should be addressed in the same manner administrators follow when users abuse

school property or violate existing laws. Why should there be a separate set of rules just because the tool has changed?

4. Get buy-in.

Once the committee convinced the technology department that this new set of principles would still protect the network, we shared the documents with district and campus administrators and sought their feedback. Because our committee chair also is an administrator, he knew the concerns administrators would have and made a special effort to address the fear, uncertainty, and doubt (FUD) that can cripple true innovation within school districts.

Once our administrators were on board, we took our final step toward making these documents a reality for DPISD. That came when the district's Educational Improvement Council officially approved the policies in May 2011.

5. Teach responsibility.

The RUP committee had one request of the technology department when they completed their work: They wanted us to develop a creative method for educating students, parents, and staff on meaningful, safe, and responsible use of technology. So we've spent the summer creating video clips and instructional materials highlighting good digital citizenship.

These materials, which will be available through the district portal this fall, illustrate the new principles that students, parents and staff are required to acknowledge with their signatures and adhere to while they are members of the DPISD community. Their compliance also is a prerequisite for the cybersecurity instruction that all students participate in each May.



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Beat BYOT Barriers

Implementing a "bring your own technology" (BYOT) program may seem daunting. But it doesn't have to be. Ease the process by following these pointers:

Leadership

- Have a vision for how BYOT can shape student success.
- Communicate that vision and the need for change to all stakeholders.
- Plan for the change.
- Address lingering fear, uncertainty and doubt (FUD).
- Develop appropriate policies that address all relevant issues.

Infrastructure

- Identify and make the necessary modifications to support BYOT.

Instruction

- Determine which pedagogies need to be modified and make the necessary adjustments.
- Determine the types of professional development that need to occur and develop programming to provide that training.